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ABSTRACT

Behavior modification has been used in classrooms, industry, and marriage counseling. In behavioral family therapy, the therapist examines how family members learn undesirable behaviors, how they can unlearn these behaviors, and how they can learn more desirable behaviors. This type of therapy is a method of direct treatment in which goals are immediately established and an action plan is developed and monitored. Family therapy, useful in both parent-child and husband-wife relationships, is guided by principles that include reinforcement, behavior shaping, consistency, and contracts. The therapeutic process follows five stages of: (1) establishing rapport; (2) identifying behaviors; (3) ranking behaviors; (4) selecting rewards/deprivations; and (5) developing contracts. Counselors should recognize, however, that clients are not always pleased with behavioral family therapy and may be quick to voice their complaints. (JAC)

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BEHAVIORAL FAMILY THERAPY:

AN OVERVIEW*

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BEHAVIORAL FAMILY THERAPY:

AN OVERVIEW

This article is an overview of the relationships, principles, processes and resistances of a behavioral approach to family therapy. The article is not designed to overview the state of the art of behavioral family therapy but to suggest how one counselor views/conducts therapy from a behavioral perspective.

Behavior modification has been used in classrooms, industry, and marriage relationships. A behavioral approach to anything is the systematic application of learning principles to the management of human behavior. In behavioral family therapy, the therapist examines how family members learn undesirable behavior, how they can unlearn these behaviors, and how they can develop/learn more desirable behaviors. Behavioral family therapy is a method of direct treatment--direct in the sense that family goals are immediately established, a plan to achieve those goals is developed, and the execution of the plan is monitored to verify if the goals are being accomplished.

The behavioral family therapist is concerned about certain relationships, operates according to certain principles, proceeds in a predictable process, and responds to various resistances.

RELATIONSHIPS

The behavioral family therapist is concerned with two basic sets of relationships--the parent-child and the husband-wife. Entry into family

therapy may be via concern with either relationship. Initial focus on the parent-child relationship can lead into a focus on the marriage relationship and vice versa. Both sets of relationships should be considered before the termination of therapy. The best gift parents can give their children is a good marriage. Similarly, a harmonious, loving parent-child relationship often has positive influences on the marriage relationship.

PRINCIPLES

Behavioral family therapy is guided by certain principles.

Behavior is the Focus of Therapy

Children are not good or bad. They are small people who engage in behaviors that make their parents think of them as good or bad. Two summers ago I spent a delightful three days camping with our five year old daughter. The experience was delightful because of the behavior she engaged in--she got out of the pool when asked, ate the food on her plate, and helped set up the tent. Her negative behavior can also make me livid with frustration.

Behavior is Learned

Aside from the eyeblink and kneejerk, most of the behavior children engage in has been learned. Such learning has occurred in reference to four basic rules of learning.

Positive Reinforcement Rule. This rule states that any behavior that is followed by a positive consequence will increase the frequency of that behavior. A child who is asked to "come here" will be more likely to do so if some of the time his/her doing so results in positive consequences. Asking your child to "come here" and then asking if he/she would like to go to the 7-11 to get a treat rewards the child for coming to you when called. Children who don't come when their parents call are rarely rewarded for doing so.

Negative Reinforcement Rule. This rule states that any behavior associated with the termination of something aversive will increase the frequency of that behavior. Eating is negatively reinforcing because it terminates an aversive feeling--hunger. Children cry a great deal because it results in the attention of an adult who will alleviate the source of distress--hunger, wet diapers, cut knee.

Punishment Rule. Any behavior that is followed by a negative consequence will decrease the frequency of that behavior. A child who is placed in "time out" for throwing food will throw food less often. A daughter whose slumber party is cancelled because she stuck her tongue out at her mother will do so less often.

Extinction Rule. Any behavior that consistently fails to be rewarded will eventually stop. Children who ask their parents to do things with them will stop asking if their parents never reinforce these requests.

The combined interaction of these rules of learning result in the child learning to engage in behavior the parents regard as appropriate and inappropriate.

Behavior Must Be Shaped

Shaping is the rewarding of successive approximations to the terminal behavioral goal. B. F. Skinner shaped a pigeon to turn around by giving the pigeon food when it turned in one direction. Once the pigeon had learned that turning slightly in one direction was associated with getting food, Skinner would wait before giving food until the pigeon turned more in that same direction. By rewarding small turning movements in one direction over time, Skinner "shaped" the pigeon to turn around.

A parent often complains "my kid never does what I ask." But compliance behavior is learned and must be shaped. For example, while at the dinner table, the parent might ask the child to "please pass the butter". Since the child is likely to comply with this request, the parent should reinforce this behavior and say "thank you". Asking this child to "bring me the newspaper please" is another request the child is likely to meet. But such asking should occur first when the parent and child are in the same room (rather than yelling from another room) and later when the two are in different rooms. Hence, getting the child to comply with a request when the parent is in the same room is a different behavior from getting the child to comply to a request when the parent and child are in separate rooms. And getting one compliance behavior established before going to the next is the essence of shaping. Children who come when they are called and show up when they have agreed to have been shaped into these behaviors.

Verbal Praise Is Essential

Parents must "catch their children being good". And they need to tell their children that they appreciate what their children are doing--"Thank you for not interrupting me when I am talking to someone else", "You are polite to share your gum with me", "Thank you for turning off the light in your room." Every contract (to be discussed in the next section) written with parents should include verbal praise twice daily to each child for specific positive behavior. Parents should begin to look for their child doing things that please them rather than waiting until they do something that upsets them.

Parental Consistency Is Essential

As anyone who has children knows, children are bright--very bright. And they learn what they are taught. If parents are not consistent in rewarding positive behavior and punishing negative behavior their children will not change their behavior consistently. If parents want one of their children to take out the garbage but never reinforce this behavior or punish its nonoccurrence, the child will learn to take it out randomly or not at all.

Parental consistency means that the child must learn two basic rules--"When I do good things, good things happen" and "When I do bad things, bad things happen." In most cases it is easier for one parent to be responsible for insuring that desirable behaviors are rewarded and undesirable behaviors are punished with the other parent in a supporting role. If both parents

undertake to manage a specific behavior, sometimes consistency breaks down--each assumes that the other is managing the behavior with the result that neither does.

Records Must Be Kept

A major distinction between a behavioral approach and other approaches is the use of records. From a behavioral perspective, records are essential. The therapist and parent must know how often a child engages in a particular behavior before attempting to change it. Such a baseline is needed to ascertain if the intervention strategy is making the target behavior better or worse. If "noncompliance" is the behavior parents wish to change and the ratio of 6 refusals for every 10 requests is the baseline, both the parents and the therapist will be able to "see" things get better or worse.

To help parents keep records, the therapist should give the parents a sheet of paper on which to record the behavior they wish to change. Each subsequent therapy session should begin with asking the parents for the record of their child's behavior.

Behavioral Contracts

Contracts are the core of behavioral family therapy. A contract is an agreement which specifies who is to do what, when, and with what consequence. A written contract is given to each parent at the conclusion of each therapy session. Such a contract specifies what the child and parent are expected to do between therapy sessions. Contracts provide their most

positive benefits when negotiated between parent and child. The older the child, the greater the input into the negotiation from the child's perspective.

Contracts Must Be Clear. Each contract must specify the behaviors the child is to engage in and the rewards the parent is to provide. A "clean room" might be defined as a room in which the bed is made, the clothes are in the closet or laundry basket, the shoes are in the closet, and the closet door is shut.

Contracts Must Have Consequences. Contracts must specify what the child gets (reward) for performing the requested behavior and what the child loses (punishment) for not engaging in the behavior. Children are asked to draw up a "reward menu" in which they specify what they want. Watching TV, staying up later, having friends over, and going swimming are examples of things children develop for their menu. Whether or not the rewards on the menu are truly rewards will be known if the behavior at issue changes as desired. Since a reward increases the frequency of a behavior, the behavior should increase if rewarded. For example, if watching TV is the reward for cleaning one's room, and the child doesn't clean his/her room, TV is not as strong a reward as not cleaning one's room--the child would rather forfeit TV than clean the room. Hence, another, more powerful reinforcer must be found to encourage cleaning room behavior. Both the parents and the therapist should focus on the effect of the reinforcer rather than the reinforcer. If the reinforcer does not increase the behavior, another reinforcer must be found.

"Time out", also known as time out from reinforcement, is a mild and effective way of punishing undesirable behavior. This involves removing a child from the room in which he/she is engaging in the undesirable behavior (temper tantrum) and placing him/her in a dull room (e.g., bathroom) for about five minutes. (Since the child will usually cry when taken to "time out" it is important for the parent to wait until the child stops crying before the parent opens the door to avoid reinforcing crying behavior.) The parent should also tell the child as he/she takes the child to "time out" what he/she did that is being punished and ask the child "Why are you in here?" when the child is being brought out. The child must know what he/she is being punished for.

"Time out" is an excellent alternative to slapping, switching, and beating. The latter cause physical pain which sometimes causes the child to view the parent as a pain producer. It is this association (pain=parent) which results in the child wanting to avoid the parent and be less compliant. "Time out" usually serves as an effective punishment without damaging the way a child views/feels about his/her parents.

PROCESS OF THERAPY

In addition to relationships and principles, behavioral family therapy proceeds through a predictable process. This process involves five stages.

Establishing Rapport

Excellent rapport between therapist and family members is absolutely essential. Such rapport can be encouraged by the therapist engaging in a

high rate of reflective remarks to the parents and children. Reflective statements also give the client an opportunity to hear the therapist describe the situation and to correct the therapist's perceptions as necessary.

Identify Behaviors

While establishing rapport, the therapist defines behaviors the parents and children want increased, decreased, developed, or terminated. Sometimes a functional analysis is necessary in which the stimulus for the behavior and the consequence of the behavior are examined. Such an analysis helps to know what brings on a behavior and what maintains it. For example, if temper tantrums occur when mother is talking on the phone and mother terminates the phone conversation to calm her son we know the stimulus for temper tantrum behavior (mother on phone) and the consequence (mother's attention) that rewards it. In addition to defining behaviors and conducting a functional analysis, some indication of the frequency is important.

Rank Behaviors

All family problems cannot be worked on at once. They must be whittled down one by one. After ranking all the behaviors parents want each of their children to engage in, the therapist should set up a treatment plan for one or two of the behaviors. By working on a small number of behaviors, the parents feel as though they are "doing something" about their problems and that what they have to do is manageable.

Select Rewards/Deprivations

A "reward menu" referred to earlier must be developed for each child. Both small, inexpensive, short term (a trip to the 7-11 to get a treat) rewards as well as large, expensive, and long term rewards (car) might be included on the list. To forfeit the rewards on the list can be used as deprivations.

Develop Contracts

If the parents are seen alone and the child is not present, a contract specifying what the child is to do (take out trash), when (before 8:00 p.m. each evening M-F), and with what consequence (tv, radio, stereo, phone, privileges for doing so, forfeiting for 24 hours if forget) is drawn up. Presenting this to the child at home is then role played by the therapist and parents with the therapist playing the role of parent. The basic dialogue follows: "Mary, we've been concerned about some things going on in the family--specifically everybody isn't doing their part. We would like to make some new rules. One of them is for you to take out the garbage every night before you go to bed. For doing this you can do the things you enjoy (tv, stereo, etc.). But if you forget, you'll have to do without them for the next 24 hours. And since you like slumber parties, if you go a week taking out the trash every night, you can have your friends over Saturday night."

If the parents are seen with the child, this is explained in the session. In general, if the child is school age or above, it is good to include them in

the sessions. One particular advantage is that they can tell the therapist exactly what they want as a reinforcer. They can also specify what behaviors they want their parent to engage in (stop nagging).

Get Feedback

Subsequent sessions are spent reviewing the contracts--did the child engage in the desirable behavior, how often, which nights? Did the parents deliver the reinforcers, withhold the privileges, and verbally praise the child as appropriate? And new behaviors become the focus of new contracts.

RESISTANCES

Clients are not always pleased with behavioral family therapy and are quick to voice their complaints. Some of the more common apprehensions include:

"It's Bribery"

Some parents feel that if they reward their child for doing chores, they are bribing their child. They feel that such bribery is a sad comment on the parent child relationship. But bribery and rewarding one's child for good behavior are different concepts. Bribery is a reward for doing something illegal. Nixon's subordinates were paid (bribed) not to expose him. In contrast, there is nothing illegal about being rewarded for behavior someone else wants. Our economic system depends on people being rewarded (paid) for expected behavior.

Rather than ask, "Am I bribing my child?" parents should ask "What behavior do I want my child to engage in and am I willing to use positive consequences to get the behavior started?" Parents who want a behavior to recur must reinforce that behavior with positive consequences. If parents don't choose to use reinforces to encourage the behaviors they want, the absence of positive consequences will insure that desirable behaviors are not learned.

"My Kid Should Do As I Say"

Related to the bribery issue is the feeling by parents that their child "should" want to engage in a particular behavior. Parents feel that the child should automatically value family togetherness and cooperation and be motivated to "help out". Such feelings are on the inside but sometimes must begin via external reinforcement. By rewarding the child for engaging in a behavior, the child is more likely to perceive that he/she is contributing to the family once the behavior is established.

"I Don't Want Them Expecting Something All The Time"

Parents also fear that if they reward their child for doing something that the child will always want a reward. There is some truth to this feeling. Children find it difficult to tolerate periods of time when they are not being rewarded. They like to play and are never ready to come in. They want to play in the tub, watch tv, and avoid going to bed. And once they are rewarded for a behavior, they want the reward the next time.

Parents can respond that "you don't get a reward every time". The child usually doesn't like to hear this but looks forward to the reward the next time.